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ABSTRACT

This digest discusses research that documents the benefits of keeping gifted students together, the advantages and disadvantages of cluster grouping, and how to implement cluster grouping strategies. It argues that cluster grouping allows educators to come much closer to providing better educational services for groups of students with similar exceptional learning needs and that gifted students feel more comfortable when there are other students just like them in the class. Identification of gifted students for participation in the gifted cluster group is discussed, along with keeping progress records for gifted students in cluster groups and specific skills needed by cluster teachers. Cluster teachers should know how to recognize and nurture behaviors usually demonstrated by gifted students, create a learning environment in which all students will be stretched to learn, allow students to demonstrate and get credit for previous mastery of concepts, provide opportunities for faster pacing of new material, incorporate students' passionate interest into their independent studies, facilitate sophisticated research investigations and provide flexible grouping opportunities for the entire class. (CR)

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CLUSTER GROUPING OF GIFTED STUDENTS: HOW TO PROVIDE FULL-TIME SERVICES ON A PART-TIME BUDGET

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Cluster Grouping of Gifted Students: How to Provide Full-time Services on a Part-time Budget

Susan Winebrenner and Barbara Devlin

There is an alarming trend in many places to eliminate gifted education programs in the mistaken belief that all students are best served in heterogeneous learning environments. Educators have been bombarded with research that makes it appear that there is no benefit to ability grouping for any students. However, the work of many researchers (Allan, 1991; Feldhusen, 1989; Fiedler, Lange, & Winebrenner, 1993; Kulik and Kulik, 1990; Rogers, 1993) clearly documents the benefits of keeping gifted students together in their areas of greatest strength for at least part of the school day. It also appears that all students, including average and below average students, may benefit when gifted students are placed in their own cluster (Gentry, 1999).

What Does it Mean to Place Gifted Students in Cluster Groups?

A group of three to six identified gifted students, usually those in the top 5% of ability in the grade level population, are clustered in a mixed-ability classroom. The teacher has had training in how to teach exceptionally capable students. If there are more than six gifted students, two or more clusters could be formed.

Isn't Cluster Grouping the Same as Tracking?

No. In a tracking system, all students are grouped by ability for much of the school day, and students tend to remain in the same track throughout their school experience. Gifted students benefit from learning together, and need to be placed with similar students in their areas of strength (Hoover, Sayler, & Feldhusen, 1993; Kulik & Kulik, 1990; Rogers, 1993). Cluster grouping of gifted students allows them to learn together, while avoiding permanent grouping arrangements for students of other ability levels.

Why Should Gifted Students Be Placed in a Cluster Group Instead of Being Assigned Evenly to All Classes?

When teachers try to meet the diverse learning needs of all students, it becomes extremely difficult to provide adequately for everyone. Often, the highest ability students are expected to "make it on their own." When a teacher has several gifted students, taking the time to make appropriate provisions for them seems more realistic. Furthermore, gifted students can better understand and accept their learning differences if there are others just like them in the class. Finally, scheduling out-of-class activities is easier when the resource teacher has only one cluster teacher's schedule with which to work.

What Are the Learning Needs of Gifted Students?

Since these students have previously mastered many of the concepts they are expected to "learn" in a given class, a huge part of their school time may be wasted. They need exactly what all other students need: consistent opportunity to learn new material and to develop the behaviors that allow them to cope with the challenge and struggle of new learning. It is very difficult for such students to have those needs met in heterogeneous classes.

Isn't Gifted Education Elitist?

Gifted students need consistent opportunities to learn at their challenge level -- just as all students do. It is inequitable to prevent gifted students from being challenged by trying to apply one level of difficulty for all students in mixed-ability classes. When teachers can provide opportunities for all students, including those who are gifted, to be challenged by rigorous curriculum, there is nothing elitist about the situation.

Don't We Need Gifted Students in All Classes So They Can Help Others Learn Through Cooperative Learning, Peer Tutoring, and Other Collaborative Models?

When gifted students are placed in mixed-ability groups for cooperative learning, they frequently become tutors. Other students in these groups may rely on the gifted to do most of the work and may actually learn less than when the gifted students are not in their groups. Research indicates that a particular structure of cluster grouping raises everyone's achievement level (Gentry, 1999). When class placements are made, students should be sorted into 5 groups: I, II, III, IV, V. One class, taught by a teacher with some gifted education training, should be assigned the cluster group of gifted students (group I) and some students from groups II to IV. All other classes should include a range of students from groups II through V. This method creates a more narrow range of student achievement levels, allowing the teacher to focus instructional activities. It is important to place some group II students in each non-cluster class, even if it means placing no group II students in the gifted cluster class.

Won't the Creation of a Cluster Group Rob the other Classes of Academic Leadership?

Research on role modeling (Schunk, 1987) indicates that to be effective, role models cannot be drastically discrepant in ability from those who would be motivated by them. When gifted students are grouped in their own cluster, they have the benefit of working with one another and new leadership emerges in the other non-cluster classes. As classes are formed, be sure the classes without clusters of gifted students include several highly capable students. Teachers and administrators can expect measurable achievement gains across all classes.

How Does the Cluster Grouping Concept Fit in with the Inclusion Models That Integrate Students with Exceptional Educational Needs into Regular Classes?

The inclusion model, in which students with exceptional learning needs are integrated into regular classrooms, is compatible with the concept of cluster grouping of gifted students, since both groups have exceptional educational needs. The practice of cluster grouping allows educators to come much closer to providing better educational services for groups of students with similar exceptional learning needs. In non-cluster classrooms, teachers report they are able to pay more attention to the special learning needs of those for whom learning may be more difficult. Some schools choose to avoid placing students with significant learning difficulties in the same class that has the cluster group of gifted students. A particular class may have a cluster of gifted students and a cluster of special education students as long as more than one adult is sharing the teaching responsibilities.

Won't the Presence of the Clustered Gifted Students Inhibit the Performance of the Other Students in That Class, Having a Negative Effect On Their Achievement?

When the cluster group is kept to a manageable size, many cluster teachers report that there is general improvement in achievement for the entire class. This suggests the exciting possibility that when teachers learn how to provide what gifted students need, they also learn to offer modified versions of the same opportunities to the entire class, thus raising the level of learning for all students, including those who are gifted. The positive effects of the cluster grouping practice may be shared with all students over several years by rotating the cluster teacher assignment among teachers who have had gifted education training and

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by rotating the other students so all students eventually have a chance to be in the same class with a cluster group.

How Should Gifted Students Be Identified for the Cluster Group?

Placement in cluster groups is gained by demonstrating that one needs a differentiated curriculum-not by proving one is "gifted." If there will be one cluster, its highly capable students should be those who have demonstrated that they will need curriculum that exceeds grade level parameters. Traditional measures, such as standardized tests, may also be used, but not as the sole criteria. If there will be more than one cluster, those highly capable in specific subjects might be grouped together in separate clusters. Profoundly gifted students should always be grouped together, since there will rarely be more than two such students in any grade level. Identification should be conducted each spring with the help of someone with training in gifted education.

What Specific Skills Are Needed by Cluster Teachers?

Since gifted students are as far removed from the "norm" as are students with significant learning difficulties, it is necessary for teachers to have special training in how to teach children of exceptionally high ability. Cluster teachers should know how to:

- recognize and nurture behaviors usually demonstrated by gifted students;
- create a learning environment in which all students will be stretched to learn;
- allow students to demonstrate and get credit for previous mastery of concepts;
- provide opportunities for faster pacing of new material;
- incorporate students' passionate interests into their independent studies;
- facilitate sophisticated research investigations;
- provide flexible grouping opportunities for the entire class.

Should the Cluster Grouping Model Replace Out-of-Class Enrichment Programs for Gifted Students?

No. Cluster grouping provides an effective complement to any gifted education program. Gifted students need time to be together when they can just "be themselves." The resource teacher might also provide assistance to all classroom teachers in their attempts to differentiate the curriculum for students who need it. As a matter of fact, this resource person is being called a "Schoolwide Enrichment Specialist" in many schools instead of a "Gifted Program Coordinator" in recognition of the fact that so many students can benefit from "enriching" learning opportunities.

Is Clustering Feasible Only in Elementary School?

No. Cluster grouping may be used at all grade levels and in all subject areas. Gifted students may be clustered in one section of any heterogeneous class, especially when there are not enough students to form an advanced section for a particular subject. Cluster grouping is also a welcome option in rural settings, or wherever small numbers of gifted students make appropriate accommodations difficult. Keep in mind, however, if your school has enough gifted students for separate sections in which curriculum is accelerated, such sections should be maintained. Many middle schools have quietly returned to the practice of offering such sections

How Are Records Kept of the Progress Made by Students in Cluster Groups?

Differentiated Educational Plans (DEPs) should be maintained for gifted students and filed with their other ongoing records. In some schools, teachers develop a DEP for the cluster group, rather than for individual students. These plans briefly describe the modifications that are planned for the group and should be shared with parents regularly.

What Are the Advantages of Cluster Grouping?

Gifted students feel more comfortable when there are other students just like them in the class. They are more likely to choose more challenging tasks when other students will also be eligible. Teachers no longer have to deal with the strain of trying to meet the needs of just one precocious student in a class. Teachers are also much more likely to provide appropriate learning opportunities if more than one student will benefit. The school is able to provide a full-time, cost-effective program for gifted students, since their learning needs are being met every day.

What Are the Disadvantages of Cluster Grouping?

There may be pressure from parents to have their children placed in a cluster classroom, even if they are not in the actual cluster group. Gifted students may move into the district during the school year and may not be able to be placed in the cluster classroom. These situations may be handled by:

- providing training for all staff in compacting and differentiation so parents can expect those opportunities in all classes
- requiring parents to provide written documentation of their child's need for curriculum differentiation instead of requesting the placement by phone
- rotating the cluster teacher assignment every 2 years among teachers who have had appropriate training so parents understand that many teachers are capable of teaching gifted students
- rotating other students into cluster classrooms over several years

Another disadvantage might arise if the cluster teachers are not expected to consistently compact and differentiate the curriculum. Their supervisor must expect them to maintain the integrity of the program, and must provide the needed support by facilitating regular meetings of cluster teachers, and by providing time for the enrichment specialist to assist the cluster teachers.

Conclusion

If we do not allow cluster groups to be formed, gifted students may find their achievement and learning motivation waning in a relatively short period of time. Parents of gifted students may choose to enroll their children in alternative programs, such as home schooling or charter schools. The practice of cluster grouping represents a mindful way to make sure gifted students continue to receive a quality education at the same time schools work to improve learning opportunities for all students.

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